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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000226

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SUBJECT: REACTION IN CUBA TO ANNOUNCEMENT OF CHANGES IN
U.S. POLICY

REF: HAVANA 207 (NOTAL)

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Classified By: COM Jonathan Farrar for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Reaction in Cuba to the April 13 announcement of changes to U.S. policy regarding travel, remittances and telecommunications activity has been generally very positive. The government of Cuba itself has been officially silent, though former President Fidel Castro has published several articles on the subject with no clear line of thought evident. Ordinary Cubans we have spoken to are very enthusiastic about the announcements and see them as a fulfillment of statements made by the President during his campaign. Our diplomatic corps colleagues are also very positive, but tend to focus immediately on what next steps the U.S. government may take. End Summary.

12. (C) Based on discussions we have had with ordinary Cubans and a number of our diplomatic colleagues, the changes in U.S. policy announced on April 13 are viewed as a very positive step. For the diplomatic corps, and to a certain extent the international press contingent, it tends to be viewed as just a first step. They quickly shift their interest to trying to find out the next step the U.S. may take to improve relations. To date, there has been little official Cuban government reaction, though Raul Castro reiterated the offer he made to CODEL Lee (reftel) to put everything on the table in discussions with the United States. However, his further comments reveal the offer to be couched in the usual context of U.S. recognition of Cuban sovereignty, meaning that human rights discussions should focus on ending the "criminal and genocidal embargo," and that discussion of political prisoners means arranging for the release of the five Cuban "heroes" now in U.S. custody. Fidel Castro has been a prolific writer since the announcement, once publishing 3 "Reflexiones" pieces in one day. However, he has blown hot and cold in his opinions, in one case saying that Cuba refuses to beg the U.S. for good relations, and in another reporting in reasonably laudatory terms on the President's European trip.

13. (C) Response among our Cuban contacts has been very positive. A constant complaint we had been hearing over the past year was that remittances and other sources of external funding, on which many Cubans depend to get by from day to

day, were insufficient to cover their needs. Like the Cuban-Americans who reportedly have been queuing up to get charter airline tickets to visit Cuba, Cubans on the island are excited about the prospect of seeing relatives, and the goods they bring, more frequently. Their only note of caution is to recall that during the last period of free travel in the late 1970s, the presence of numerous Cuban-American relatives throughout the island contributed to social unrest that resulted in the Mariel boatlift. They fear that the current regime may anticipate a repeat of that unrest and take some pre-emptive action that will put bilateral relations back in the deep freeze.

¶4. (C) Unlike the diplomatic corps and the press, most ordinary Cubans are not looking past the April 13 announcement and pressing for the immediate lifting of the embargo. Even those, such as dissident economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, who strongly oppose the embargo recognize that there must be substantive change in the system on the island before lifting the embargo will have any significant impact on their standard of living. The travel and remittance changes, on the other hand, are seen as being capable of having an immediate positive effect on the lives of many Cubans. One contact in the cultural community, while expressing his hope that cultural exchanges will follow quickly, said that opening up remittances was possibly the most important step the U.S. could have taken because it offers Cubans the wherewithal to improve their standard of living, and then have enough left over to begin to create civic associations using their own resources. When ordinary Cubans do look to the future, they wonder how long it will take to open travel to American tourists as a follow-on step. They view such a move as a way to force the government to open up further as it tries to manage the expected large numbers of Americans who will not (they hope) be as easily

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corralled into specific areas as foreign tourists are now. The more thoughtful local analysts wonder how such a large number of tourists would be housed and fed, and how the government's efforts to cater to tourists could affect their own standard of living.

¶5. (C) Dissident doctor Hilda Molina did raise the embargo, saying she thought the U.S. should lift the restrictions on exports to Cuba, but should insist on full payment in advance. "They won't be able to bring in any more goods under those terms," she said, "but they won't be able to use the embargo as an excuse either." Even as they welcomed the policy changes and the benefits they will bring to Cubans, prominent dissidents Martha Beatriz Roque and Vladimiro Roca speculated that no matter what the U.S. government does, the government of Cuba will latch on to another issue to use as an impediment to improved relations, noting that Fidel Castro already denounced the "genocidal" Cuban Adjustment Act in one of his "Reflexiones" articles.

¶6. (C) COM and P/E chief met over lunch with mixed groups of diplomats during the week. In both cases, the diplomats reported how excited they were that there seemed to be genuine movement in U.S.-Cuban relations for a change. COM spoke at length over lunch April 15 with French Ambassador Frederic Dore, Lebanese Ambassador Jean Makaron, and Papal Nuncio Luigi Bonazzi regarding the U.S. policy announcement on April 13 and potential reaction from Cuba. Ambassador Dore was extremely positive, citing especially the lifting of restrictions on remittances as having the potential to effect great changes within Cuban society. He said the GOF was very supportive, and that Special Envoy Jack Lang had issued a statement hailing the announcement. Lebanese Ambassador Makaron said the changes were positive, but that Lebanon hoped the next step by the United States would be to lift the embargo. COM noted the next steps might come from Cuba, which had yet to respond beyond editorials attributed to Fidel Castro. Makaron's response was, "but of course. The United States can't do it alone."

¶7. (C) The Papal Nuncio's view was that the United States had taken three steps, and needed to take six more. He said we should not expect Cuba to make a gesture in response to Monday's announcement. COM replied that our policy changes were made without preconditions, were not contingent upon GOC actions, and stand on their own. He added that it was reasonable to expect a GOC response, public or private, and that there were many areas in which Cuba could take positive steps were it to choose to do so. The Papal Nuncio then raised a favorite issue of his, a theoretical trade of the five Cuban agents in U.S. prisons in return for release of Cuba's political prisoners. COM noted, as he has before, that there are substantial differences between the two groups, and that many of the political prisoners and their families were against such a swap, especially if it would imply exile from Cuba.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: As Washington agencies consider next steps on Cuba, USINT recommends the interagency focus on actions on our part which would be in the U.S. national interest regardless of any GOC response, such as increased travel and stays by U.S. religious groups and workers, and actions that may provide an umbrella for future progress, such as the resumption of bilateral migration talks. End Comment.
FARRAR